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ABSTRACT

In contrast to the past, when English teachers were considered responsible for the quality of their instruction, the present push for accountability comes from outside the profession and has taken several forms including competency based teacher education (CBTE), licensing, and achievement testing. Mandated in several states, CBTE deals with the way in which teachers are trained and certified and involves cooperative programs between colleges and school systems that list in detail the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that future teachers are to acquire. Licensing, a substitute for conventional certification, recommends that teachers be licensed in the same way as other professional practitioners such as doctors and lawyers and that teaching receive the same legal status. Accountability in the form of achievement testing requires that students pass tests at various educational levels before moving to the next level. While the accountability movement can be positive in its impact on priorities, organization of instruction, and skill and attitude identification, it is important that English educators take an active role in determining how the field is to be monitored and work toward a greater unity of purpose from within the profession. (HAI)

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Good Change, Bad Change, Changeless Change; or What Else is New and What's the Price?

A long time ago, before Toynbee, I was fairly certain that there would always be an England. Now I am not so sure. I used to think that small pox and measles would be wiped out. But my friends in public health tell me that I am too optimistic. However, I am certain that the existence of English teachers is not really threatened -- at least for the duration of our professional lifetimes. Plagues may come and go, nations may slip into the abyss of history, but the need for people to do what English teachers do (or something of that ilk) will persist.

Respect for the meaning of words obliges me to say, if only for the record, that I know that English as a school subject does not have a precise definition and that what English teachers do differs from place to place and from time to time. When I was a schoolboy, I read short stories, novels, plays, and poems; and I studied formal grammar. My English teachers never taught a unit on the newspaper or magazine. In 1937, NCTE published a book called FILM AND THE SCHOOL, and in 1941 RADIO AND ENGLISH TEACHING belatedly appeared. Film study as part of the English canon has retained and enlarged its toehold, but radio has been shunted aside (improperly, I think) by television. Some people think that journalism, for example,

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has no place in English teaching. Others complain that English teachers should assume more responsibility for what is known as Speech, which includes teaching the use of the telephone. What is English? we occassionally ask, as the glittering variety of our subject dazzles our eyes. Is the use of the telephone "English"? Is radio or television literature? What is literature? Must it be written, as the etymology of the word suggests? If so, goodbye (for example) to folklore which, by definition, is oral, at least in origin. A great many typewriter ribbons have been consumed by writers on questions such as these, and it is true that we differ in how far we can, as a practical matter, extend the boundaries of our concerns. Money and time are the real limitations. I think that most of us, however, are united in our concern for (1) understanding language, (2) the appropriate use of language, and (3) the facilitation of the literary experience. At this level of abstraction, we have little trouble recognizing each other as English teachers. And these concerns are still of sufficient importance to society so that we are not (I think) about to slip with the dodo and the trilobite into extinction.

Nevertheless, in spite of these positive pronouncements, these are hard times, uncertain times. They are hard times

economically because of shrinking enrollments which are the consequence of a declining birthrate. They are hard times because school budgets (now being defeated in record numbers) are the easiest target for those who (rightly or wrongly) are angered by high taxes. There are many reasons for our hard times, and not least among them is the push for accountability. I wish to comment about accountability in New York State and about some of the forms which the accountability movement has taken.

I do not wish to appear to depreciate the pain of our colleagues who are the economically dispossessed, who are the victims of the socioeconomic vagaries (or madness) of our time. Without, I say, depreciating the plight of these people, I think we must distinguish between familiar afflictions and those newly mutant forms against which the corpus professional does not yet have antibodies.

My reference to mutant forms is far from casual. In some ways, accountability is a familiar problem. We have talked about it for a long time, although previously we did not use the word accountability and were more likely to speak of responsibility or professionalism. But in some respects the accountability of today is not familiar. It is subtly changed or mutated, so to speak. Its apparent familiarity masks important changes and deceives us into

believing that we are dealing with our old adversary when, in fact, our old adversary has grown doubly dangerous because of its new power and because of our own unawareness of its acquired potentialities.

The accountability of today stands aloof from the schools and from the people who teach and study within them. Secure in power and encouraged by popular misconceptions about what the schools can rightly be expected to accomplish under the best of circumstances -- it feeds the popular discontent and scowls judgmentally as it casts about for more and more precise ways to pinpoint and quantify the shortcomings of the schools. "We will take your measure," the advocates seem to be saying, "and when we do, you will either shape up or ship out." To change the metaphor, this is an accountability horse of a different color and nature. I suspect it will throw many riders and break many bones before it is put out to pasture. This neo-accountability is flawed because it is imposed from without and because it is based upon an extreme form of behaviorism at its manipulative worst.

In former times we were encouraged to think of ourselves as self-responsible for the quality of our work. We saw ourselves morally committed to do the best possible job. Our so-called professional status depended in part

upon our assumption of responsibility for our own professional acts. Each individual would judge this for himself, and the established practices of the group would provide the standard by which each individual would measure himself or, in certain circumstances, be measured by others from within the academic community.

It would be easy to romanticize the situation I have just described. To be sure, there were problems, some serious. The State did not protect untenured teachers from arbitrary or malicious dismissal. Academic freedom, which is particularly important to English teachers, was not vigorously and affirmatively and widely supported in the public schools, and not all teachers were fully conscientious in the discharge of their duties, and not all were as capable as they should have been. Nor were all as well prepared as they should have been. These problems have their contemporary counterparts, needless to say.

The blame for the faults in the past must be widely shared by individuals who functioned poorly in the classroom, by administrators who abused their position, by the State Education Department which either tinkered or slumbered, by professional organizations (such as the NEA, the largest and most influential at the time) which lived

too comfortably and too long with the status quo, and by governmental institutions which tended to wait until the wheel squeaked before oiling it and, then, did not apply the best lubrication. In this last group I must include the USOE. It had been an innocuous and impotent information-gathering agency until the Congress gave it an infusion of money which it used to sponsor, among other things, projects related in one way or another to what we now call accountability. By 1974, according to a survey by Allan Schmieder of the USCE, 41 states were in varying stages of progress toward competency based teacher education (CBTE), and only 10 were still in the preliminary "studying the concept" stage.

The push in education toward accountability has taken several forms. I shall comment briefly about CBTE, licensing, and achievement testing. CBTE has attracted a great deal of interest in officialdom at the state and federal levels but has generated at best a mixed reaction among teachers. CBTE deals with the way teachers are trained and certified and, thus, also deals with the mechanism by which teachers remain in, or are removed from, the profession.

In New York State, one of the early CBTE proposals discussed in the State Education Department would have wiped out "input" in the form of course work and degrees

for teachers and would have substituted a practical teaching test. Certification would be for 5-year periods, and recertification would depend upon a measurement of the success of the teachers' work. This plan, apparently, assumed that a precise quantitative/qualitative measure could be developed fairly soon and that if the student had not learned then the teacher had not taught. This plan was never implemented. Nor was it every officially made public. News of it leaked out and stimulated some opposition. Subsequent plans that were made public retreated from the more extreme positions. At the present time, CBTE in New York State is mandated and involves cooperative programs between colleges and school systems. A feature of all these cooperative programs is that they list in great detail the skills, knowledges and attitudes that the future teacher is supposed to acquire. Whether the enumeration of competencies, the cooperative planning, and the intended accomodation of students' individual needs will provide better teachers -- remains to be seen.

Licensing, as a substitute for conventional certification is still in the talking stage in New York State. A State-wide committee headed by Arnold Gardner, a lawyer and former chairman of the Buffalo Board of Education, recommended that teachers be licensed the way other pro-

fessional practitioners (such as doctors and lawyers) are licensed and that teaching be given the same legal status as other professions. Last year, when the legislature might have begun formal study of the proposal, nothing happened. The proposal has interesting possibilities. However, the public disenchantment with the way physicians and lawyers have regulated themselves may account in part for the quiet with which the proposal was greeted.

Accountability in the form of minimum competency testing started out with a bang in 1975 and 1976 in Florida, California, and Oregon. Its advocates were noneducators. By 1978, 33 states had taken some action to implement minimum competency testing. Then the movement switched into low gear, although it did not stop. Growing awareness of the complexities of the problem inspired caution, as did the cost of remediation for those who failed the test. A glimpse at what some people have in mind for New York State can be obtained by examining Assembly Bill 9870. It would test all students for reading readiness before entrance to Grade 1; it would require a competency test after each half-year's work, require another before advancement from Grade 8 to 9. At this point, students who do not demonstrate minimum competency would be transferred to a vocational training program, and students who fail after Grade 10 would be placed in full-

time apprenticeship programs in industry. Does this proposed legislation appear to you to offer a constructive solution of the problem? It would certainly transport a great many nonachievers out of the classroom and into the shop. Does the bill assume that industry is the right place for those who have flunked the 3 R's? Or is the bill merely arranging to give people brooms to push for the rest of their lives?

Accountability is an attractive idea -- and seductive, too. It deserves inspection. I think we should start by asking to whom we are accountable and how the standard of accountability was decided upon. How broadly based is the standard and how widely supported. Or is it the idea of a few people who are in a position to impose it and are themselves largely unaccountable? I should like to know how good the instrument is which purports to measure our competency. This matter of measures is the shakiest pillar in the whole accountability edifice. As I mentioned earlier, the Education Department in New York originally anticipated that precise instruments would be developed which would enable teaching performance to be measured by student performance. Since the Department recognized that such precise and subtle measures were not yet in existence, it simply said that it intended to utilize such measures as soon as they were devised. So far as I

know, the Department has never officially and publically altered this position. The intention still hangs overhead, Damocles-like. The only permanent, pointed object I can think of that hangs from above is a stalactite, and I shall be satisfied if this plan turns to carbonate of lime and remains firmly attached to the ceiling of some cave in Albany.

In case you have not noticed, my response to accountability in general and CBTE in particular includes a large admixture of doubt and distrust -- doubt in the efficacy of the proposal and distrust of many of the people in leadership roles in government and elsewhere who have pushed too hard, too soon, too uncritically for its implementation. I have nothing but sympathy and praise for the people on the front lines in the public schools and colleges who have tried to eliminate the most onerous features and create programs that will work. But critical as I am, I must add that I see some possibly positive outcomes.

The accountability movement has certainly reminded us of the ancient truth that the "tree is known by his fruit" (Matthew 12:33); the push for accountability has encouraged us to look at our results and to improve them whenever we have the means to do so. Of course, sometimes we have the means and sometimes not. Again to speak

positively, I think that the accountability movement has helped us to work out our priorities and to organize instruction a bit more efficiently and to identify skills, attitudes, and knowledges that both we and society believe are important to impart. Teacher preparation programs in the past have erred somewhat in emphasizing abstractions, theories, and attitudinal matters at the expense of practical skills. It is not enough for teachers to know the history of the English language (for example) and not enough for teachers to know that they should like children. The liking must be translated into appropriate behavior and the teachers must also be able to do a variety of other things, such as choose suitable recordings to be played at suitable times for well-defined purposes without scratching the disk. I am not downgrading the theoretical or abstract matters. I am saying only that a certain bias in the past needed correction. I hope that the accountability movement will not provide an overcorrection.

When I look at the accountability movement as a socio-historical event, I find several things which trouble me. I am troubled by this further evidence of our predilection for panaceas. When will we learn -- when will be ever learn -- that the way to achieve progress is not to give up the ship -- which is what the then Assistant Commissioner

for Higher Education, Alvin Lierheimer, told us to do back in 1969. We need, instead, judicious plans for change that are given genuine trials before they are widely adopted. Nothing like this happened in New York.

I am troubled, also, by the factory model that seems to be in the minds of the advocates of accountability. The use of such terms as product, school management, output, and efficiency (when taken together) betray an analogy between industry and education that may well be the most unfortunate misconception to afflict education since President Garfield invited Mark Hopkins to sit with him on a simple bench in a log hut -- almost 108 years ago.

John Goodlad's forthcoming and massive study called "Schooling in America" deplores the factory model for education. He studied 39 selected schools across the country using techniques much like those of an anthropologist. According to Goodlad, as reported in the KAPPAN for September 1978, "schools are complex, unique cultures, and we had better seek to understand them better before we try to change them." It certainly is strange that we should be contending with a factory model for education when industry itself, after Lordstown, has been having second thoughts about its suitability in industry. And it was this same industrial model which was applied

to the military under McNamara during the Vietnam era. It almost seems as though things that fizzle elsewhere are then tried out on education. I wonder if driver education classes are going to be offered incendiary Pintos with Firestone radials. If so, maybe we can decline the offer.

I say maybe we can decline the offer because we have not had much to say about the conduct of our professional lives. This troubles me as much -- or more -- than anything I have mentioned. We have more organizations and less organization than any other profession. Only recently has the situation begun to change as the NEA and AFT compete to show how helpful they can be. I should prefer that they combine their strength and find some middle ground on which all -- or most -- of us can stand. But at least we in New York can thank our lobbyists that things are not worse.

I see no way to apply cosmetics to one ugly truth. We have been more acted upon than acting. The one hope is that the solution is in our own hands. We have not yet seized the opportunity, but we could and should. Our history is not encouraging, but the past is not inevitably replicated in the future. As for the present, we are still squandering our strength in fraternal squabbles. Recently,

when a member of the New York State Board of Regents proposed competency tests for teachers, a NYSUT vice president agreed and argued that it is "only fair that if we've mandated tests for children, we should have them for teachers as well" (quoted in UNIVERSITAS, Sept. 1978, p. 39). NEA disagreed[5] and opposed competency tests for both students and teachers. Edwin Robisch, president of NEA's New York Educators Association, suggested facetiously that we should have a minimum competency test for members of the Board of Regents. The disagreement, important as it is, is less important than the schism it betrays even among the members of the organized profession. Until we have a greater cohesiveness, we will allow the important decisions to be made by others.

If Poe's "The Bells" were somehow an accompaniment to this talk, the bell you would hear most clearly would be the alarm bell, Now I want to stop the clangor and introduce a calmer sound. I have said that the solution is in our hands. If Pogo was right when he said he met the enemy and he was us, then the thing to do is to get to work on ourselves. Even after the Holocaust, I think Jonathan Edwards was wrong. We are only capable of depravity but we are not naturally depraved. No -- the fellow who figured us out was Alexander Pope who said, you recall, that we are the glory, jest, and riddle of the world.

Well, when the riddle boggles your mind and the jest goes sour, remember the glory. And don't give up the ship.